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## THE IMPORTANCE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDY IN THE GENERAL SCHEME OF AMERICAN EDUCATION

*By* C. M. PURIN

EVER since the birth of institutions of learning the study of foreign languages has always held an important place in the general educational scheme of all civilized nations of the globe. To eliminate this important discipline from the curricula of our schools in order to make room for some of the so-called "practical" disciplines—a demand which has been seriously raised here and there—would mean to slight deliberately the best interests of the commonwealth by weakening the fabric both of education and of citizenship. To be sure, the voice of the people is not to be ignored, for, after all, the foremost duty of every institution of learning is to serve the needs of the community, but the danger lies in the possibility of placing purely local interests above those of the nation. Furthermore this "voice of the people"—meaning the opponents to foreign language study—will be found to be coming, for the most part, from the ranks of the misinformed and the inexperienced.

In the following an attempt is made to summarize briefly the most important reasons why the study of foreign languages must be considered indispensable in all schemes of popular education.<sup>1</sup>

### FOREIGN LANGUAGE AS A MENTAL AND LINGUISTIC DISCIPLINE

A conscious and discriminating attitude towards language can not be developed through work exclusively in the vernacular.

<sup>1</sup> This summary is based on the statement prepared by the foreign language departments of the University of Wisconsin.

The use of the mother tongue throughout the primary and grammar grades becomes quite naturally a subconscious process. When the pupil takes up the study of a foreign language, which in our country usually means in the High School, he gains a standard of comparison and is thus led to a discriminative and objective analysis of linguistic problems. Compared with subjects like history or the sciences, foreign languages afford a more definite (because more limited) material for study. Like mathematics, the foreign language necessitates close and orderly thinking, admitting no inattention or lapse of effort and calling for the highest degree of concentration. Foreign language study is a strict yet varied discipline. It demands the accumulation of basic principles and facts and their constant applications; it exercises both memory and powers of observation; it trains in readiness, accuracy, and thoroughness. The processes of thought are stimulated by constant demands upon the judgment. In no other field of intellectual training will there be found a combination of the same disciplinary qualities with the same richness of subject matter. The study of a foreign language brings about a better understanding and a deeper appreciation of the mother tongue in all of its linguistic aspects. It is a fact acknowledged by the teachers of English, that the pupil taking a foreign language usually acquires a grammatical mastery of English such as the student of English alone rarely possesses.

#### FOREIGN LANGUAGE AS A CULTURAL FACTOR

The study of a foreign language develops sympathy and understanding for the more fundamental aspects of the life and character of foreign peoples. This sympathy and understanding are especially necessary in our country, in view of our composite population and our national tendency to underrate foreign achievement. The greatest value of the study of a foreign language lies, accordingly, in its humanizing effect. It is the only road to the intellectual and soul life of ancient or modern people. It confers a citizenship with the world and a citizenship with the ages. It makes the individual a conscious part of the great human unity. It is a force for cosmopolitanism and the peace and progress of the world. It makes broader minded, and therefore better citizens of our republic.

## FOREIGN LANGUAGE AS A PRACTICAL STUDY

In this era of utilitarianism it may be well to point out also the "practical" features immanent in foreign language work. For the scholar and professional man the pursuit of advanced scholarship in almost any field today is impossible without a knowledge of at least one of the basic languages, German or French. The results of non-English European scholarship are immediately accessible only to those who can read the foreign language, since translations usually appear at a later date, and much valuable material which finds its way into dailies and periodicals is never translated. The knowledge of a foreign language—even if it be only a reading knowledge—is thus of an immense advantage to the engineer, the medical man or those engaged in work dealing with sciences in general, such as research in Geology, Astronomy, Agriculture, Physics, Anthropology. In our commercial relations with other nations the knowledge of modern foreign languages becomes more and more imperative. Americans, as compared with educated Europeans, all too often find themselves at a serious disadvantage in international competitive activities on account of their unfamiliarity with foreign tongues. For the merchant and trader at home, particularly in cities with considerable foreign population, the ability to speak the foreign language is a great asset. Finally, for schools with limited means, foreign languages are "practical" subjects since they can be well and thoroughly taught without a high priced equipment (as to space and apparatus). Thus even in terms of dollars and cents the study of foreign languages—is quite worth while and a "paying" proposition.

## THE INADEQUACY OF TRANSLATIONS

"One of the most notable characteristics of the life of contemporary society is its international quality," says a Russian writer. The days when humanity lived in groups, without the knowledge of what was happening at a few miles distance, are gone. The modern man is a citizen of the world. It is incumbent upon him, for economic if for no other reasons, to have at least a general knowledge of the potential energies, both material and spiritual, possessed by his neighbor. To do this, however, it becomes an absolute necessity to become familiar with the language of the

foreign nation. It has been frequently maintained that an insight into foreign life and culture can be equally well gained through English translations, without going through the cumbersome and time wasting process of foreign language study. Such notions are as erroneous as they are misleading. To study a foreign language does not simply mean to find vocabulary equivalents. In the large majority of cases there are no equivalents, since the concepts and the experiences associated with the foreign symbols are widely different from those of our own. In the words of Professor Dodge—a foreign language is not learned until the foreign words arouse a consciousness of the foreign groupings of experience.—And—no words, not even excepting scientific and technical terms, have absolutely fixed meanings. To learn a language then involves two distinct facts. It involves first some understanding of the foreigner's experiences, and secondly, it involves an association between that experience and its conventional symbols. Now, one of the real advantages of studying a foreign language, like one of the advantages of foreign travel, consists in the widening horizon, the new view point, in a word, the new experiences we gain.<sup>2</sup> The final and chief aim of foreign language study, therefore, is to penetrate into the depths of the intellectual and psychic life of the foreign nation in all of its aspects and manifestations, which is surely as instructive and broadening as the study of the biological sciences or history or geography.

#### FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

It might be pointed out by the opponents of foreign language study that as far as the work in our lower schools is concerned very little of this final and higher ambition can be realized. Quite true. But the same argument will apply to any and all of the other disciplines. All we can attempt in our high schools is to lay a foundation upon which a later day structure may be erected. What valid reasons are there for the assumption that the study of History, Botany, Zoology, or Geography, for instance, should be of greater value to the pupil upon leaving the high school than the training received in a foreign language? The chief function

<sup>2</sup> Dodge, Raymond: *School Artifice and Psychological Principle in Modern Language Instruction*. Publications of the New England Modern Language Association, May 9, 1908, pp. 66-67.

of the American lower school is, after all, not to teach the pupil a specific trade or profession but to give him a broad and general training, and any school which omits foreign languages from its curriculum fails to fulfill its most sacred duty, viz., to transmit to our youth the key which unlocks the literary warehouse where the treasures of centuries and of ages are stored.

#### WHEN TO BEGIN THE STUDY OF A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

The proposed—and in some parts of the country accomplished—reconstruction of both the common and high school courses, whether within the traditional educational framework or on the junior high school basis, can not fail to arouse the keenest interest among the teachers of foreign languages, modern as well as classic. With the introduction into the upper grades of differentiated courses (academic, industrial, commercial, agricultural, etc.), opportunity may be given to begin the study of foreign languages at an age more suitable for elementary linguistic discipline. The recommendation of the Committee of Ten (to the Nat. Educ. Asso. in 1894) that modern foreign languages be begun in the upper grades of our schools will then find the proper environment for being put into practice, and the pupils will no longer be compelled to wait for this study until they enter the higher institutions of learning.

One of the saddest blunders of our present educational system is to postpone the study of a foreign language until our young men or women enter the high school or even the college. By this time the student has begun to specialize for his life's work. He is interested pre-eminently in those studies which have a direct bearing upon his future career. To study the elements of a foreign language at this age means to many of them a disagreeable grind. In order to get to a point where the enjoyable part of the work begins—the foreign literature—he needs at least two years of elementary drill and one additional year of further study, and the student feels that too much of his valuable time (particularly in college) must be devoted to a study which promises comparatively scant returns, as far as his vocational interests and ambitions are concerned. Hence results that resentment which has been so frequently voiced, especially on the part of the students whose linguistic abilities are not very pronounced.

In the reorganized school system the pupil may begin to study a foreign language at an age when he is less self-conscious (and likewise less conscious of his surroundings), more willing to imitate freely, to memorize and to submit to mechanical linguistic drills. Having acquired a good pronunciation and a fair practical working vocabulary in the grades, the pupil upon entering the high school proper, will be prepared for a higher type of work. He will be introduced gradually to the literature of the foreign people and to the more advanced forms of written and oral reproduction. Pupils for whom high school education is to be culminal, will be thus enabled to derive from the study of a foreign language real practical as well as cultural benefits; practical in so far as they will be able to apply the knowledge of the foreign language in their daily pursuits, whenever and wherever necessary; cultural in so far as the pupils will have acquired the taste for good literature and a standard of comparison of literary production, aside from having gained an insight into the intellectual and moral wealth of other peoples.

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